

RUINS AND VISIONS

by the same author

POEMS

VIENNA

TRIAL OF A JUDGE

THE STILL CENTRE

RUINS AND VISIONS

poems by

STEPHEN SPENDER

FABER & FABER LIMITED

24 Russell Square

London

*First published in Mcmxlii
by Faber and Faber Limited
24 Russell Square, London, W.C.1
Printed in Great Britain by
Western Printing Services Ltd., Bristol
All Rights Reserved*

CONTENTS

Part One: A Separation

SONG	page 11
A SEPARATION	13
THE VASE OF TEARS	14
THE DOUBLE SHAME	15
THE JOURNEY	17
A HALL OF MIRRORS	18
NO ORPHEUS, NO EURYDICE	21
A WILD RACE	23

Part Two: Ironies of War

THE WAR GOD	29
TO POETS AND AIRMEN	32
THE AIR RAID ACROSS THE BAY	34
WINTER AND SUMMER	36
IN MEMORIAM	38
JUNE 1940	40

Part Three: Deaths

THE AMBITIOUS SON	page 47
TOD UND DAS MAEDCHEN	51
THE DROWNED	53
WINGS OF THE DOVE	55
THE FATES	57

Part Four: Visions

AT NIGHT	67
THE BARN	70
IN A GARDEN	72
A CHILDHOOD	73
INTO LIFE	75
THE COAST	77
DUSK	79
DAYBREAK	82
TO NATASHA	83

PART ONE: A SEPARATION

SONG

Stranger, you who hide my love
In the curved cheek of a smile
And sleep with her upon a tongue
Of soft lies which beguile,
Your paradisal ecstasy
Is justified is justified
By hunger of all beasts beneath
The overhanging cloud,
Who, to snatch quick pleasures run,
Before their momentary sun
Be eclipsed by death.

Lightly, lightly from my sleep
She stole, our vows of dew to break,
Upon a day of melting rain
Another love to take;
Her happy happy perfidy
Was justified was justified
Since compulsive needs of sense
Clamour to be satisfied
And she was never one to miss
The plausible happiness
Of a new experience.

I, who stand beneath a bitter
 Blasted tree, with the green life
Of summer joy cut from my side
 By that self-justifying knife,
 In my exiled misery
 Were justified were justified
If upon two lives I preyed
 Or punished with my suicide,
 Or murdered pity in my heart
 Or two other lives did part
To make the world pay what I paid.

Oh, but supposing that I climb
 Alone to a high room of clouds
Up a ladder of the time
And lie upon a bed alone
 And tear a feather from a wing
And listen to the world below
And write round my high paper walls
 Anything and everything
Which I know and do not know!

A SEPARATION

Yes. The will decided. But how can the heart
decide,
Lying deep under the surface
Of the level reasons the eye sees—
How can the heart decide
To banish this loved face for ever?

The starry eyes on the fringe of darkness
To forgo? The light within the body's blindness?
To prove that these were lost in any case,
And accept the stumbling stumps of consolations,

When under sleep, under the day,
Under the world, under the bones,
The unturning changeless heart,
Burning in suns and snows of passion,
Makes its mad protestations
And breaks, with vows and declarations?

THE VASE OF TEARS

Tears pouring from this face of stone,
Angels from the heart, unhappiness
From some dream to yourself unknown—
Let me dry your eyes with these kisses.
I pour what comfort of ordinariness
I can; faint light upon your night alone.
And then we smother with caresses
Both our starved needs to atone.

Stone face creased with human tears: yet
Something in me gentle and delicate
Sees through those eyes an ocean of green water
And one by one the bitter drops collects
Into my heart, a glass vase which reflects
The world's grief weeping in its daughter.

THE DOUBLE SHAME

You must live through the time when everything
hurts

When the space of the ripe, loaded afternoon
Expands to a landscape of white heat frozen
And trees are weighed down with hearts of stone
And green stares back where you stare alone,
And the walking eyes throw flinty comments
And the words which carry most knives are the
blind

Phrases searching to be kind.

Solid and usual objects are ghosts
The furniture carries cargoes of memory,
The staircase has corners which remember
As fire blows red in gusty embers,
And each empty dress cuts out an image
In fur and evening and summer and gold
Of her who was different in each.

Pull down the blind and lie on the bed
And clasp the hour in the glass of one room
Against your mouth like a crystal doom.
Take up the book and look at the letters

Hieroglyphs on sand and as meaningless—
Here birds crossed once and cries were uttered
In a mist where sight and sound are blurred.

For the story of those who made mistakes
Of one whose happiness pierced like a star
Eludes and evades between sentences
And the letters break into eyes which read
What the blood is now writing in your head,
As though the characters sought for some clue
To their being so perfectly living and dead
In your story, worse than theirs, but true.

Set in the mind of their poet, they compare
Their tragic bliss with your trivial despair
And they have fingers which accuse
You of the double way of shame.
At first you did not love enough
And afterwards you loved too much
And you lacked the confidence to choose
And you have only yourself to blame.

THE JOURNEY

U pon what confident iron rails
We seemed to move to the clear view
At the end of the line, where, without fail,
My visions would come true.

There, where the sun melts the curved hills
In one transparent wave against the skies,
I'd see your tender smile, more than your will,
Shine through the coldness of your eyes.

Our harsh tongues of to-day would run in tears
Back to this buried Now become the past.
In the cool shadows we'd unclasp our fears
Transformed to love at last.

Oh, but then suddenly the line
Swung onto another view
Barren with myself, and the blank pain
Of the cramped world without you.

A HALL OF MIRRORS

Into a hall of mirrors
A hall of many mirrors
I enter,

Searching for that one face
Of innocence: amongst your many faces
Endlessly repeated in the empty spaces
Of your own eyes;
Suspended thinly on threads
Of your own self-admiring gaze.

At last, at last, when the light drops
From the glass tongues of praise,
In the dark your eyes are afraid,
Cowering at the bottom of a sad and lonely pit,
And your head like a doll's on your arm falls.

Yet a voice flowers from your sleep
And Venus throbs through your shut eyelids.

I search through a tunnel of past years
For a child who stands quite alone
Fallen from the care of the world's hands,
Exposed to all her fears,
Her face bright as a fruit with wet tears,
And I fall down shafts of love
Into the abyss of something human
Something lost when the long nights advance,
Hidden behind the hands of chance.

I search deep in the wells of weakness
And I read the innocence beyond the lie
The truth behind the evasive eye,
The terrible lost innocence
Fluttering faintly in a distant dance,
And the truth that stands, and begs forgiveness.

Till I drown, drawn down by my own mercy.

Somewhere in the night, above the branches
Restless with tongues of leaves over the square,
Where you and I and all
The false play-acting puppets are,
In a high room, hidden in the darkness,
There lies your heart, the truly good,
Swathed in the flesh where all roses unfold,
Warm in the nest which is the root of beds,
Surrounding me with love like all the stars

Blessing a birth with seed of fires,
O, waiting with an infinite gift
Which to refuse to search and find
Is to be cold and cruel and blind.

NO ORPHEUS, NO EURYDICE

Nipples of bullets, precipices,
Ropes, knives, all
Now would seem as gentle
As the far away kisses
Of her these days remove
—To the dervish of his mind
Lost to her love.

There where his thoughts alone
Dance round his walls,
They paint his pale darling
In a piteous attitude standing
Amongst blowing winds of space,
Dead, and waiting in sweet grace
For him to follow, when she calls.

For how can he believe
Her loss less than his?
“True it is that she did leave
Me for another’s kiss;
Yet our lives did so entwine
That the blank space of my heart
Torn from hers apart,
Tore hers too from mine.”

O, but if he started
Upon that long journey
Of the newly departed
Where one and all are born poor
Into death naked,
Like a slum Bank Holiday
Of bathers on a desolate shore;

If, with nerves strung to a harp,
He searched among the spirits there,
Looking and singing for his wife
To follow him back into life
Out of this dull leaden place,
He would never find there
Her cold, starry, wondering face.

For he is no Orpheus,
She no Eurydice.
She has truly packed and gone
To live with someone
Else, in pleasures of the sun,
Far from his kingdoms of despair
Here, there, or anywhere.

A WILD RACE

I

I know a wild race
Foreign to their own time
Estranged from their loved
And hating home place.

Inhabitants of dead languages,
They still live in intact quarters
Of cities and speeches.

From ashen parchment
And corroded stone
Their bearded thoughts
Are still outspoken,

Out of dust and bone
The broken unbroken.

For their teeth stamped words
Which still flash with eyes
Where, whiter than paper,
Their day dazzles libraries.

And they were as far
From their contemporaries
As the living to-day
From those are.

Far as the stars
Whose out-of-the-past light
Ravishes to-night's night
With their present-
piercing future.

II

Their unloved love
Luminous with words
Like a sun burned
Through the transparent body
Of their day's beauty
For which they yearned.

Their endless need
And their timeless gift
Lay on the light eyelids
Of their self-seeking
Feminine city
Like a reproach, weighed
With immortality.

The beloved, afraid,
Laughed, and betrayed.

III

But a girl to-day, dreaming
On her wave of time
With April clouds dawdling
Through the mirror of her eyes,
Lays down her book
And smiles and sighs
Lifting her empty head
Across the gulf of centuries:—

“O, if print put on flesh
And these words were whispers
From the lips of the poet
In the vase of my face,
Then this wave would be a river
Where my name would float for ever
And my flower never fade.

“O, I would understand
What his own time and land
Never knew: that his heart
Was torn apart
✓By loss large as a vulture: hence
The black fury of his dress
And his hair in disorder.

“O, I would take his hand
And his words would be my mirror
Where I saw my face for ever.”

She thinks, turning from her lover
Whose need then hung above her
Like an eagle in the air.

And across the gulf of time
The cold terrible snow mountains
Saw his naked heart alone
And they knew him
And he knew them.

PART TWO: IRONIES OF WAR

THE WAR GOD

Why cannot the one good
Benevolent feasible
Final dove descend?

And the wheat be divided?
And the soldiers sent home?
And the barriers torn down?
And the enemies forgiven?
And there be no retribution?

Because the conqueror
Is an instrument of power,
With merciless heart hammered
Out of former fear,
When to-day's vanquished
Destroyed his noble father,
Filling his cradle with anguish.

His irremediable victory
Chokes back sobbing anxiety
Lest children of the slain
(When the ripe ears grow high

To the sickles of his own
And the sun goes down)
Rise in iron morning
To stain with blood the sky
And avenge their fathers again.

His heart broke before
His raging splendour.
The virgins of prayer
Fumble vainly for that day
Buried under ruins,
Of his pride's greatest murder
When his heart which was a child
Asking and tender,
He hunted and killed.

The lost filled with lead
On the helpless field
May dream the pious reason
Of mercy, but also
Their eyes know what they did
In their own proud season,
✓ Their dead teeth bite the earth
With semen of new hatred.

For the world is the world
And not the slain
Nor the slayer, forgive,
Nor do wild shores

Of passionate histories
Close on endless love;
Though hidden under seas
Of chafing despair,
Love's need does not cease.

TO POETS AND AIRMEN

*(Dedicated to Michael Jones in his life, and now in his
memory)*

Thinkers and airmen—all such
Friends and pilots upon the edge
Of the skies of the future—much
You require a bullet's eye of courage
To fly through this age.

The paper brows are winged and helmeted,
The blind ankles bound to a white road
Streaming through a night of lead
Where cities explode.
Fates unload

Hatred burning, in small parcels,
Outrage against social lies,
Hearts breaking against past refusals
Of men to show small mercies
To men. Now death replies
Releasing new, familiar devils.

And yet, before you throw away your childhood,
With the lambs pasturing in flaxen hair,
To plunge into this iron war,

Remember for a flash the wild good
Drunkenness where
You abandoned future care,

And then forget. Become what
Things require. The expletive word.
The all-night-long screeching metal bird.
And all of time shut down in one shot
Of night, by a gun uttered.

THE AIR RAID ACROSS THE BAY

I

Above the dead flat sea
And watching rocks of black coast
Across the bay, the high
Searchlights probe the centre of the sky
Their ends fusing in cones of light
For a brilliant instant held up
Then shattered like a cup.

They rub white rules through leaden dark,
Projecting tall phantom
Masts with swaying derricks
Above the sea's broad level decks.

They slide triangles and parallels
Of experimental theorems,
Proving the hypothesis
Of death, on wasted surfaces
Of measureless blank distances.

II

But through their gliding light-streams,
An invisible ragged sound
Moves, trailed by two distraught beams.
A thudding falls from remote cones
And pink sequins wink from a shot-silk screen.

Seeds of killing drop on cells of sleep
Which hug these promontories like dark-brown
winkles.

Fingers pick away
Human minds from hollow skulls.

III

The shining ladders slant
Up to the god of war
Exalted on those golden stilts
And riding in his car
Of a destroying star.

But the waves clucking in the rocks
And the sacred standing corn
Brittle, and swaying with metallic clicks,
Their secret wealth lock
In an elemental magic
Of ripeness, which mocks
The nails through flesh torn.

WINTER AND SUMMER

Within my head, aches the perpetual winter
Of this violent time, where pleasures freeze.
My inner eye anticipates for ever
Looking through naked trees and running wheels
Onto a blank transparent sky
Leading to nothing; as though, through iron aims,
It was stared back at by the filmy surface
Of a lid covering its own despair.

Thus, when the summer breaks upon my face
With the outward shock of a green wave
Crested with leaves and creamy foam of flowers,
I think the luxurious lazy meadows
Are a deceiving canvas covering
With a balmy paint of leafy billows,
The furious volleys of charioteering power
Behind the sun, racing to destroy.

When under light lawns, heavy in their soil,
I hear the groaning of the wasted lives
Of those who revolve unreflecting wheels,

Alas, I prove that I am right,
For if my shadowed mind affirmed the light
It would return to those green, foolish years
When to live seemed to stand knee-deep in flowers:

There, winter was an indoor accident,
Where, with head pressed against the glass, I
 watched
The garden, falsified by snow,
Waiting to melt, and become real again.

IN MEMORIAM

The senseless drone of the dull machines in the
sky
In a chain extending the boundaries
Of a distant invisible will,
Weaves a net of sound in the darkness on high
Drawing the senses up in one Eye
From our tunnelled entombed bodies,
Where everything stops but the wishes that kill.

Living now becomes withered like flowers
In the boring burned city which has no use
For us but as lives and deaths to fill
With fury the guns blazing back on the powers
That scorch our small plot of blasted hours:
Death we cannot refuse
Where everything stops but the wishes that kill.

Driven by intolerance and vultured with lies,
We melt down the whirring bodies of boys
And their laughter distil
To plough metal hatred through the skies
And write with their burning eyes over cities

Sure no green summer joys,
Where everything stops but the wishes that kill.

Filled with swear words, laughter and fire,
Soothed by the girl hands and clothed in my
words,

What, my fine feather-head, laughing lad
Bill,

Was your life, but a curveting arc of desire
Ricochetting in flames on your own funeral pyre

Instinctive as birds,
Where everything stops but the wishes that kill?

JUNE 1940

The early summer prepares its green feasts
In the garden, hot on the blossom of the peach,
Pressed close by bird song, crossed by bees,
Electrified with lizards; and the voices each to each

Speak, afloat on deck chairs. They say
How little they know of the battle far away
Different from the war in France in their day.

Beyond the hot red walls, the blowing
Of dust on dog roses in the hedges,
The meadows weighed with shadows, bringing
Youths with girls and bicycles, at evening
Round the War Memorials of villages;

Beyond the crisp sea, with lines
Engraved by winds and keels on glass dunes,
Perpetually moving and appearing still,
Tiring the eye with a permanent dance;
Far away! Divided by gleaming scissors
Of the steel channel—the raw edge of France.

Through their voices there moves a murmur like a
ball
Rolled across the plains and hills,
Divided to ruffled whispers by the seas.

For the German caterpillar-wheeled dreams,
Imagined into steel, volley
Through the spring songs and the green hedges,
Crushing the lark's nest, with a roar of smoke,
Through the weak barriers of France.

"False is this feast which the summer, all one garden,
Spreads before the senses. Our minds must harden."

"Nor ears nor eyes, but the will
Is the perceiving organ of the soul.
Man's world is not nature, but Hell
Where he struggles to make a nightmare whole."

"History is a dragon under the soil
Wearing to-day only as a skin
Which man sloughs off when his dreams begin."

"The season of our soul is doom
Born to-day from a terrible womb."

“Yes, we see the dragon’s teeth of the past
From a hungry childhood grown
Into avenging warriors at last.”

“Indolent injustice for so long
Snoring over Germany, now is overthrown:
To face *us* with a still greater wrong.”

“While we forgot, and the sun seemed to forgive,
Those bitter children were alive.
Their hatred never forgot to thrive.”

“Well, well, the greater wrong must meet
To-morrow with a worse defeat.”

Afloat on the lawn, the ghastly last-war voices
With blue eyes gaze for a moment on this:
England chained to the abyss.

Then, altogether, they begin
To murmur: “Of course, we shall win.”

But the voice of one who was young and died
In a great battle, in the light leaves sighed:—

“I lay down with a greater doubt:
That it was all wrong from the start:
Victory and defeat both the same,

Hollow masks worn by shame
Over the questions of the heart.
And there was many another name
Dividing the sun's light like a prism
With the rainbow colours of an "ism".
I lay down dead like a world alone
In a sky without faith or aim
And nothing to believe in,
Yet an endless empty need to atone."

PART THREE: DEATHS

THE AMBITIOUS SON

✓ Old man, with hair made of newspaper cutting
And the megaphone voice,
Dahlia in the public mind, strutting
Like a canary before a clapping noise,

My childhood went for rides on your wishes
As a beggar's eye strides a tinsel horse,
And how I reeled before your windy lashes
Fit to drive a paper boat off its course!

✓ Deep in my heart I learned this lesson
As well have never been born at all
As live through life and fail to impress on
Time, our family name, inch-tall.

Father, how we both pitied those who had let
The emptiness of their unknown name
Gleam on a rose and fade on a secret,
Far from our trumpeting posthumous fame!

For how shall we prove that we really exist
Unless we hear, over and over,

Our ego through the world persist
With all the guns of the self-lover?

Oh, when the weight of Time's whole darkness
Presses upon our shuttered fall,
How shall we prove, if our lives went markless,
That we have lived at all?

But, my admired one, imagine my sorrow
When I watched the schoolboys' inquisitive faces
Turn away from your Day, and To-morrow
Mock your forehead with sneering grimaces.

Soon you lay in your grave like a crumpled clown
Eaten by worms, by quicklime forgotten,
Fake, untragic, pelted down
By a generation still more rotten.

When I left the funeral, my face was hard
With my contempt for your failure still
But, Father, my hardness was a scabbard
Sheathing your undefeated will.

Behold, a star fled from your breast
Of death, into my life of night
Making your long rest my unrest,
My head burn with frustrated light.

Through my breast there broke the fire
Of a prophetic son's anointment
Seeking a fame greater than Empire.
It was then I made my appointment

With Truth, beyond the doors of Death.
How like an engine do I press
Towards that terminus of my last breath,
When all the Future you and I possess

Will open out onto those endless spaces
Where, from an incorruptible mine,
Yours and my name take their places
Among the deathless names that shine!

O Father, to a grave of fame I faithfully follow!
And yet I love the glance of failure tilted up
With swimming eyes and waiting lips, to swallow
The sunset from the sky as from a cup.

Often I stand, as though outside a wall,
Outside a beggar's face, where a child seems hidden,
And I remember being lost, when I was small,
In a vast, deserted garden.

If I had the key I might return
To where the lovers lie forgotten on bright grass.
The prisoners and the homeless make me burn
With homesickness when I pass.

Yes! I could drown in lives of weakness,
For I pity and I understand
The wishes and fulfilments under the dream surface
Of an oblivious and uncharted land.

TOD UND DAS MAEDCHEN

From a tree choked by ivy, rotted
By liver-shaped fungus on the bark,
Out of a topmost branch
A single sprig is seen
That shoots against the sky its mark,
As though the dying trunk could launch
The whole life of the sap
Into one wedge-shaped steadfast glance
Above the lapping shining circling evergreen.

So with you,
Where you are lying,
The strong tide of your limbs drawn back
By green tides of regret,
And the sorrowful golden flesh
Scorched on by disease,
How difficult is dying
In your living dying eyes.

Oh how, when you have died,
Shall I remember to forget,
And with knives to separate
Your death from my life—

Since, darling, there is never a night
But the restored prime of your youth
Peaceful, does not float
Upon my sleep, as on a boat,
With the glance of love that lives
Inescapably as truth.

THE DROWNED

They still vibrate with the sound
Of electric bells,
The sailors who drown
While their mouths and ships fill
With wells of silence
And horizons of distance.

Kate and Mary were the city
Where they lingered on shore
To mingle with the beauty
Of the girls: they're still there—
Where no numbness nor dumbness
Appals dance hall and bar.

No letters reach wrecks;
Corpses have no telephone;
Cold tides cut the nerves
The desires are frozen
While the blurred sky
Rubs bitter medals on the eyes.

Jack sees her with another
And he knows how she smiles

At the light facile rival
Who so easily beguiles
Dancing and doing
What *he* never will now.

Cut off unfairly
By the doom of doom
Which makes heroes and serious
Skulls of men all,
Where under waves we roll
Whose one dream was to play
And forget death all day.

WINGS OF THE DOVE

Poor girl, inhabitant of a strange land
Where death shines through your gaze,
As though a terrible moonlight
Stared through these light days
With the skull-like gleam of night;

Poor child, you wear your summer dress
And your scarf striped with gold
As the earth wears a variegated cover
Of coloured flowers
Covering chaos and destruction over
Where deaths are told.

I look into your sunk eyes,
Shafts of wells to both our hearts,
Which cannot take part in the lies
Of acting these gay parts.
Under our lips, our minds
Become one with the weeping
Of the mortality
Which through sleep is unsleeping.

Of what use is my weeping?
It does not carry a surgeon's knife
To cut the wrongly multiplying cells
At the root of your life.
It can only prove
That extreme love
Stretches beyond the flesh to hideous bone
Howling in the dark alone.

Oh, but my grief is thought, a dream,
Which a clean gale will sweep away.
It does not wake every day
To the facts which are and do not merely seem:
The granite facts around your bed,
Poverty-stricken hopeless ugliness
Of the fact that you will soon be dead.

THE FATES

I

In the theatre,
The actors act the ritual of their parts,
Clowns, killers, lovers, captains,
At the end falling on the sword
Which opens out a window through their hearts
And through the darkness to the gleaming eyes
Of the watching masks slightly bored,

Of the audience
Acting the part of their indifference,
Pretending the thrusting pistons of the passions, ✓
Contorted masks of tears and mockery,
Do not penetrate the surface fashions
Covering their own naked skins.

“We are not green fools nor black-eyed tragedians,
Though perhaps, long ago, we were the killers.
Still, still we have our moments of romance
Under the moon, when we are the lovers.
But the rules of fate do not apply to us.

The howling consequences can be bribed away
Discreetly, without fuss.
When we have left the play
The furies of atonement will not follow after
Our feet, into the street
Where the traffic is controlled all day."

Sitting in stalls or pit, they pray
That the externalized disaster
Gesticulating puppets display
Will not, with finger of catastrophe
Revolve on them its hissing frontal limelight:
Not lift the curtains of their windows,
Not rape their daughters in the coarse embrace
Of the promiscuous newspapers
Running with them in headlines through the streets.
In their lives, they have cut few capers
So death, they hope, will be discreet,
Raising a silk hat,
Dressed in black, with a smile for each tear, polite.

Oh which are the actors, which the audience?
Those who sit back with a tear, a smile, a sigh,
Where they deny deny deny?
Or those on the stage who rip open their ribs
Lift the lids from their skulls, tear the skin from
their arms,
Revealing the secret corridors of dreams,
The salt savour of the passions,

The crushed hyacinths of corruption,
The opera-singing sexual organs:
And within all, as in a high room,
Filled with a vacuum containing infinite space,
The soul playing at being a gull by a lake,
Turning somersaults, immensely bored,
Whistling to itself, writing memoirs of God,
Forgetting
What time and the undertakers undertake?

Oh which are the actors, which the audience?
The actors, who simulate?
Or those who are, who watch the actors
Prove to them there is no fate?
Where then is the real performance
Which finally sweeps actors and audience
Into a black box at the end of the play?

Both, both, vowing the real is the unreal,
Are stared at by the silent stars
Of the comprehensive universe
Staging its play of passions in their hearts.
It carries them off at the end in a hearse.

II

O brave, powdered mask of weeded motherhood
For twenty years denying that the real
Was ever anything but the exceptional,
You were an excellent stage manager,

For your dear son's sake, of your theatre,
Family life, not sombre, but light:
"This is the play where nothing happens that can
 matter
Except that we are sensible healthy and bright."

Your problem was no easy one,
Somehow to spare your only son
From the gloomy brooding blue of his father's eyes
After the War, for twenty years
Pacing the lawn between two wars,
His sombre way of staring at the table.
You were courageous and capable
Gaily you called these things his "moods".
Just "moods", "moods", like anything else,
A chair, the empty clanging of alarm bells.

You rebuilt the Georgian house with the old lawn,
And the kitchen garden surrounded by a wall,
And the servants in the servants' hall
Tidying the rooms downstairs at dawn;
And you bought a fishing rod, a pony and a gun
And gave these serious playthings to your son.

The fresh air and the scenery did the rest.
He ripened and his laughter floated on the lake,
A foretaste of the memories that now suggest
His photograph with the shirt open at the neck.
He came downstairs to dinner, "dressed".

Then your triumphant happiness bound cords
Around his silken glance into one bow.
Catching your husband's eye, your face spoke words
"This is the world, we've left the past below."

If a guest came, and in the course
Of conversation, spoke of "so-and-so's divorce",
Or else, "Poor Lady X, she died of cancer",
You had your fine frank answer,
Questioning him with vivid curiosity,
Poverty, adultery, disease, what strange mon-
strosity!
You smiled, perhaps, at your guest's eccentricity
Dragging such specimens out on your floor.

(Your son grew up, and thought it all quite real.
Hunting, the family, the business man's ideal.
The poor and the unhappy had his sympathy.
They were exceptions made to prove his rule.
And yet he had his moments of uneasiness
When in the dazzling garden of his family
With the green sunlight tilted on your dress,
His body suddenly seemed an indecency,
A changeling smuggled to the wrong address.

✓Still, he got married. She was dull, of course.
But everything had turned out quite all right.
The bride sailed on the picture page in white
Arm linked in his, face squinting in the light.

Your son wore uniform. You, the mother-in-law
Who'd brought him up into a world at war,
At last felt tired. You wondered what he knew of life,
Whether enough to satisfy his wife.
Perhaps he'd learned from nature, or his horse.

III

Oh, but in vain
Do men bar themselves behind their doors
Within the well-appointed house
Painting, in designed acts, life as they would see it,
By the fireside, in the garden, round the table.

The storm rises,
The thunderbolt falls, and how feeble
Is the long tradition strengthened with reverence
Made sacred to respect by all appearance,
Or the most up-to-date steel-and-concrete
To withstand fate.

The walls fall, tearing down
The fragile life of the interior.
The cherishing fire in its grate
Consumes the house, grown to a monster,
(As though the cat had turned into a tiger
Leaping out of a world become a jungle
To destroy its master.)

The parents fall
Clutching with weak hands beams snapped like
 straw,
And the handsome only son,
Tanned leader of his village team,
Is shaken out of the soft folds
Of silk, spoiled life, as from a curtain.

He is thrown out onto a field abroad.
A whip of lead
Strikes a stain of blood from his pure forehead.
Into the dust he falls,
The virginal face carved from a mother's kisses
As though from sensitive ivory,
Staring up at the sun, the eyes at last made open.

AT NIGHT

During day's foursquare light
All is measured by eyes from the outside,
Windows look and classify the clothes
Walking upon their scaffolding of world.

But at night
Structures are melted in a soft pond
Of darkness, up to the stars.

Man's mind swims, full of lamps,
Among foundations of the epoch.
Clothes fade to the same curtains
As night draws over the blaze of flesh.

His heart—surrounded by money,
Loaded with a house, and hub-like
Centring spokes of fashionable change—
Grows dizzy at uncertainty,
At life longer than single lives,
At an opening out of spaces
Revealing stars more numerous
Than the overcrowded populace.

Every social attribute gained
Falls into the Milky Way.
The questions so long hidden
Behind the answers of the present
Rise from the superstitious past
Like ghosts from ruined palaces.

Into his hand of a single moment
There pour forgotten races
With eyes opening on plains like flowers,

And the unknown nations to come after,
Unthinkable as his own death dismissed
To the vanishing point of the future;

All are crushed into the bones of Now
Knit in his flesh of loneliness.

Oh, but his "I" might glide
Here into another such "I"
Invisible in nakedness;
His heart in the heart of darkness find,
Stretching from lonely birth to lonely
Death, like a mind behind the mind,
The image of his own loneliness,

The answering inconsolable cry
Of lost humanity,
Which the explicit day
Colours and covers and explains away.

THE BARN

Half-hidden by trees, the sheer roof of the barn
Is warped to a river of tiles
By currents of the sky's weather
Through long damp years.

Under the leaves, a great butterfly's wing
Seems its brilliant red, streaked with dark lines
Of lichen and rust, an underwing
Of winter leaves.

A sapling, with a jet of flaming
Foliage, cancels with its branches
The guttered lower base of the roof, reflecting
The tiles in a cup of green.

Under the crashing vault of sky,
At the side of the road flashing past
With a rumour of smoke and steel,
Hushed by whispers of leaves, and bird song,
The barn from its dark throat
Gurgitates with a gentle booming murmur.

This ghost of a noise suggests a gust
Caught in its rafters aloft long ago,
The turn of a winch, the wood of a wheel.

Tangled in the sound, as in a girl's hair
Is the enthusiastic scent
Of vivid yellow straw, lit by a sun-beam
Laden with motes, on the boards of a floor.

IN A GARDEN

Had I pen ink and paper,
I think that they could carry
The weight of all these roses,
These rocks and massive trees.

The hills weigh peacefully on my mind,
The grottoed skull encloses
Shifting lights and shade.
Soft on the flesh all the green scene reposes

But that the singing of those birds
Pressed to the hot wall of the sky,
Tears through the listening writing of the eye
To a space beyond words.

A CHILDHOOD

I am glad I met you on the edge
Of your barbarous childhood.

In what purity of pleasure
You danced alone like a peasant
For the stamping joy's own sake!

How, set in their sandy sockets,
Your clear truthful transparent eyes
Shone out of the black frozen landscape
Of those grey-clothed schoolboys!

How your shy hand offered
The total generosity
Of original unforewarned fearful trust,
In a world grown old in iron hatred!

I am glad to set down
The first and ultimate you,
Your inescapable soul. Although
It fade like a fading smile
Or light falling from faces
Which some grimmer preoccupation replaces.

This happens everywhere at every time:
Joy lacks the cause of joy,
Love the answering love,
And truth the objectless persistent loneliness,
As they grow older,
To become later what they were
In childhood earlier—
In a grown-up world of cheating compromises.

Childhood, its own flower,
Flushes from the grasses with no reason
Except the sky of that season.
But the grown desires need objects
And taste of these corrupts the tongue
And the natural need is scattered
Amongst satisfactions which satisfy
A debased need.

Yet all prayers are on the side of
Giving strength to innocence,
So I pray for nothing new,
I pray only, after such knowledge,
That you may have the strength to become you.

And I shall remember
You, who, being younger,
Will probably forget.

INTO LIFE

Aiming from clocks and space,
O Man of Flesh, I hew
Your features, blow on blow.
I cut away each surface
To lay bare what I know—
Universe within you.

Shut close in your mind,
You never quite will learn
To see your life as whole.
Your mirrors are too blind;
They have no eyes that turn
From each age on your soul.

Your sense flies to each facet
Striking from each hour;
Now all heat, now all brain,
All sex, sickness, power;
That severe line, when I place it,
Seems nothing but pain.

Yet all experience, like stars
 (In distances of night,
 Their brilliant separate incidents
Divided by light-years)
 Hangs in your eyes the lights
 Of sustained co-existence.

What you were, you are,
 And what you will be, you are, too.
 Born, you're dead; loving, are sad.
The years add, star by star,
 The whole of life consuming you
 In fires of good and bad.

THE COAST

These riding and ridden faces
Upon the wheels and tracks of trade,
With ruts where money runs; their talk
A metal traffic; bodies jolting trucks; their glances
Squinting six months ahead to count the profit,
Not a day beyond;
These in the streets, the dives, the shops, the City,

Inhabit this coast of rocks,
Poriferous stone expectorated on
By jellied spittle; rockpools lisping—
Blog, blah, fligger, fluck, fick, mallock.

Where the tide furls back shallow finny waves,
My swearing mates in their blue dungarees
Stand on the endless mud-flats reaching back
To their unscrupulous births. The sea
Will swill away the tag-ends of their names
With cards, and all that harbours do forget.

Would not, to open any door
Onto the star socketed in a skull,

Or through the domed night to the balanced scales,
Or following threads leading to faith
Sustained between two pairs of eyes:
Be false and frail as flowers
Crushed by iron machines of power?

Yet there are eyes which float upon the wreckage
Secretly clinging to a gleaming straw.
Some acts of kindness wave their handkerchiefs.
A trickling life runs through clogged veins
And streams flow backward buried under flesh.

A wind blows hither

Rest, rest, you ghoulisn masks of life,
At last the fingers of the sky
Will lift the hard expressions from your tongues,
Unlock the mild sighs from your skulls,
Laugh with the laughter clinging to the marrow,
And knit you, flesh and bone,
Into a life of joy again.

DUSK

Steel edge of plough
Thrusts through the stiff
Ruffled fields of turfy
Cloud in the sky.
Above charcoal hedges
And dead leaf of land
It cuts out a deep
Gleaming furrow
Of clear glass looking
Through our funnelled day
Up a stair of stars.

On earth below
The knotted hands
Lay down their tasks,
And the wooden handles
Of steel implements
Gently touch the ground.
The shifting animals
Wrinkle their muzzles
At the sweet passing peace,

Like bells, of the breeze;
And the will of Man
Floats loose, released.

The dropping day
Encloses the universe
In a wider mantel
Than meridian blaze.
A terra cotta blanket
Of dark, robs one by one
Recognition from villages,
Features from flowers,
News from men,
Stones from the sun.

All the names fade away.
With a spasm, nakedness
Assumes menkind.
Their minds, cast adrift
On beds in upper rooms,
Awaiting the anchorage
Of sleep, see more
Than a landscape of words.

The great lost river
Crepitates
Through creeks of their brains.
Long-buried days
Rise in their dreams.

Their tight fists unclosethe
The powers they hold,
The manners and gold.

Then the burning eye
Of a timeless Being
Stares through their limbs
Drawing up through their bones
Mists of the past
Filled with chattering apes,
Bronze and stone gifts,
From all continents
Of the tree of Man.

The sun of this night
Mocks their dark day
Filled with brief aims
—Stealing from their kind
And killing their kind.
Abandoning hope,
They turn with a groan
From that terror of love
Back to their daybreak of
Habitual hatred.

DAYBREAK

At dawn she lay with her profile at that angle
Which, sleeping, seems the stone face of an angel;
Her hair a harp the hand of a breeze follows
To play, against the white cloud of the pillows.
Then in a flush of rose she woke, and her eyes were
open
Swimming with blue through the rose flesh of dawn.
From her dew of lips, the drop of one word
Fell, from a dawn of fountains, when she murmured
“Darling”,—upon my heart the song of the first bird.
“My dream glides in my dream,” she said, “come
true.
I waken from you to my dream of you.”
O, then my waking dream dared to assume
The audacity of her sleep. Our dreams
Flowed into each other’s arms, like streams.

TO NATASHA

You, whom such fragments do surround
Of childhood straying through your face
Leaving two signs of hair there as your name—
Through the loneliness
Of my long look past the darkness
At the tunnel's end, I watch your curving neck,
The wondering colours marvel in your eyes,
My space of silence touch your dawn that lights
My life's emerging line.

You, who are afraid of fear,
Whose past has moulded hollows in your cheeks,
Who murmur "mercy", turning in your sleep,
Whose glances touch me with shy voices:
Your fingers of music
Pressing down a rebellion of mistakes
Raise here our devout tower of mutual prayer.

I am one who knows each day his past
Tear out the links from an achieving chain;
(Daily through vigorous imagining

I summon my being again
 Out of a chaos of nothing.
My grasp on nothing builds my everything
Lest what I am should relapse into pieces.

Darling, this kiss of great serenity
Has cast no sheet anchor of security
 But balances upon the faith that lies
 In the timeless loving of your eyes
 Our terrible peace, where all that was
Certain and stated, falls apart
 Into original meanings, and the words
That weighed like boulders on us from the past
Are displaced by an earthquake of the heart.